DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 418 443 CS 509 809

AUTHOR Myers, Scott A.; Smith, Ronda L.; Sonnier, Michelle F.
TITLE Sibling Communication Functions across the Life-Span.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Communication Association (Chicago, IL, April 2-5, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; *Communication Skills; Higher Education; Questionnaires; Sex Differences; *Sibling Relationship; *Siblings; Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS *Functional Communication; Life Span

ABSTRACT

An investigation examined whether perceived use of sibling functional communication skills differed across the life-span. Participants were recruited through university students enrolled in an introductory communication course at a southern university. All students received extra credit for recruiting two participants. Potential participants were required to have at least one sibling. Participants completed the Communication Functions Questionnaire (Burleson and Samter, 1990), in addition to providing demographic data. Three significant findings were noted: (1) with the exception of referential skill, no significant differences in perceived use of functional communication skills emerged across the life-span; (2) affectively-oriented functional communication skills were used more frequently by siblings than nonaffectively-oriented skills; and (3) female siblings were perceived to use comforting, ego support, and conflict management skills more so than male siblings. (Contains 18 references and a table of data). (Author/NKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 418 443

Sibling Communication Functions Across the Life-span

Scott A. Myers (smyers@acc.mcneese.edu)
Department of Speech and Theatre Arts
P. O. Box 90420
McNeese State University
Lake Charles, LA 70609-0420
(318) 475-5051 office
(318) 475-5922 fax

Ronda L. Smith (ronda_smith@uwlax.edu)
Department of Communication Studies
Room 315 Center for the Arts
University of Wisconsin-La Crosse
La Crosse, WI 54601
(608) 785-6716 office
(608) 785-6719 fax

Michelle F. Sonnier
Department of Speech and Theatre Arts
P. O. Box 90420
McNeese State University
Lake Charles, LA 70609-0420
(318) 475-5040 office
(318) 475-5922 fax

A paper presented at the annual meeting of the
Central States Communication Association
Chicago, Illinois
April, 1998

CS 509809

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
S. Myers
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Sibling Communication Functions

Across the Life-span

The purpose of this investigation was to examine whether perceived use of sibling functional communication skills differed across the life-span. Three significant findings were noted. First, with the exception of referential skill, no significant differences in perceived use of functional communication skills emerged across the life-span. Second, affectively-oriented functional communication skills were used more frequently by siblings than nonaffectively-oriented skills. Third, female siblings were perceived to use comforting, ego support, and conflict management skills more so than male siblings.

Sibling Communication Functions

Across the Life-span

The sibling relationship is an involuntary, salient relationship that is not only enduring, but serves many functions. It is estimated that at least 80% of the population spends at least one-third of their lives with their siblings (Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1994). Through this life-span, siblings act as teachers, companions, playmates, confidantes, peers, and friends (Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1994; Goetting, 1986). And generally, siblings report being satisfied with their sibling relationships (Martin, Anderson, Burant, & Weber, 1997; Myers, 1998; Newman, 1991).

Within the realm of interpersonal (e.g., Burleson & Samter, 1990, 1996; Burleson, Kunkel, & Birch, 1994; Burleson, Samter, & Lucchetti, 1992; Westmyer & Myers, 1996) and organizational (e.g., Myers, Smith, & Ropog, 1998) relationships, the use of functional communication skills is essential. According to Burleson and Samter (1990), there are eight functional communication skills which people believe are important for others to possess. These skills are (a) comforting skill (the ability to make a person feel better when depressed), (b) ego support skill (the ability to make a person feel good about him/herself, (c) conflict management skill (the ability to develop mutually satisfying solutions in conflicts), (d) persuasive skill (the ability to modify a person's thoughts and behaviors), (e) referential skill (the ability to convey information clearly), (f) regulative skill (the ability to help someone who has violated a norm), (g) narrative skill (the ability to tell stories and jokes), and (h) conversational skill (the ability to initiate, maintain, and terminate casual conversations). Four skills (i.e., ego support, comforting, conflict management, regulative) are affectively-oriented, and four skills (i.e., persuasive, narrative, referential, conversational) are nonaffectively-oriented (Burleson & Samter, 1990).

One relationship in which the study of functional communication skills has been neglected is the sibling relationship. Researchers have not examined whether siblings use these eight functional communication skills nor how siblings vary in their use of the eight functional communication skills across the life-span. Because sibling communication does change over the life span (Cicirelli & Nussbaum, 1995), it is possible that the perceived use of functional communication skills changes as well. To investigate this claim, the following hypothesis is posited:

H1 Perceived sibling use of functional communication skills will vary across the life-span.

Not only may the use of functional communication skills differ across the life-span, but it is possible that siblings place a greater emphasis on the use of particular functional communication skills. Using a sample of self-described friends, Burleson et al. (1992) found that best friends evaluated the importance of communication skills in similar ways while nonfriends differed in their evaluation. Young adult friendships are characterized by similar levels of functional communication skills, and individuals who have similar levels of these skills also report being more satisfied with the friendship (Burleson & Samter, 1996). Furthermore, it is more important that friends possess affectively-oriented skills than nonaffectively-oriented skills (Burleson & Samter, 1990), and the use of affectively-oriented skills is deemed more important by best friends than by casual friends or acquaintances (Westmyer & Myers, 1996). Affectively-oriented skills are also correlated with attraction and similarity between romantic partners (Burleson et al., 1994).

Because the importance of functional communication skills varies across friendship levels (e.g., Burleson & Samter, 1990; Westmyer & Myers, 1996), it is likely the importance of

communication skills varies among siblings. The emphasis on affectively-oriented skills by more highly intimate relationships suggests that these skills may be more valued. In the sibling relationship, satisfaction is often influenced by affectively-oriented behaviors such as solidarity, trust, self-disclosure, and veral aggression (Martin, Anderson, & Mottet, 1997; Martin et al., 1997; Myers, 1998). Thus, it is plausible that siblings will place a higher importance on affectively-oriented skills than nonaffectively-oriented skills. To investigate this claim, the following hypothesis is posited:

H2 Perceived sibling use of affectively-oriented functional communication skills will occur more frequently than perceived sibling use of nonaffectively-oriented skills.

Sibling sex may also affect perceptions of functional communication skills. Generally, within sibling relationships, women report more so than men that disclosive behaviors contribute to their perceptions of relational closeness (Floyd & Parks, 1995). Female same-sex siblings also consider self-disclosure to be more important than both male same-sex and cross-sex siblings (Floyd, 1996). In regard to functional communication skills, Westmyer and Myers (1996) found that women place a greater emphasis on comforting skill, conflict management skill, and ego support skill than men. And because women typically consider affectionate communication to be more appropriate in nonromantic relationships than men (Floyd, 1997; Floyd & Morman, 1997), it stands to reason that male and female siblings will differ in their use of functional communication skills. To examine this notion, the following hypothesis is posited:

H3 Perceived use of functional communication skills will differ significantly between male and female siblings.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through students enrolled in an introductory communication course at a small southern university. All students received extra credit for recruiting two participants. All potential participants were required to have at least one sibling in order to participate in the study. Prior to questionnaire distribution, students were trained in questionnaire administration and ethics. Together, the students returned 138 usable questionnaires.

The participants included 57 men and 81 women. The age of the participants ranged from 11 to 63 years (M = 28.70, SD = 12.93). Participants were required to reference one of their siblings as they completed the questionnaire. The target sibling included 51 men and 87 women. The age of the siblings ranged from 10 to 69 years (M = 28.60, SD = 12.60).

Procedures and Instrumentation

Each participant completed the Communication Functions Questionnaire (Burleson & Samter, 1990) in addition to providing the demographic data profiled above. Participants were instructed to identify a sibling (by initials) and to complete the scale in reference to that sibling. Responses for all scale items ranged from strongly agree (7) to strongly disagree (1).

The Communication Functions Questionnaire is a 33-item scale that asks respondents to rate the importance of eight communication skills in a particular context. In this study, participants were asked to rate the degree to which their sibling used each skill. The eight skills are conflict management skill, conversational skill, ego support skill, comforting skill, persuasive skill, referential skill, narrative skill, and regulative skill.

Previous reliability estimates for the eight dimensions have ranged from .69 to .91 (Burleson & Samter, 1990; Burleson et al., 1992; Samter & Burleson, 1990; Myers et al., 1998; Westmyer & Myers, 1996). In this study, subscale scores were conflict management skill (M = 26.02, SD = 6.43, alpha = .86), conversational skill (M = 16.07, SD = 3.98, alpha = .72), ego support skill (M = 21.54, SD = 5.50, alpha = .89), comforting skill (M = 20.35, SD = 5.84, alpha = .89), persuasive skill (M = 19.33, SD = 4.70, alpha = .65), referential skill (M = 20.88, SD = 5.35, alpha = .80), narrative skill (M = 19.59, SD = 5.40, alpha = .79), and regulative skill (M = 19.96, SD = 4.08, alpha = .65). An overall coefficient alpha of .96 was reported for the summed scale (M = 169.09, SD = 43.07).

Data Analysis

The first hypothesis was answered using a series of oneway analyses of variance (ANOVAs). To aid in data interpretation, the referenced siblings were placed into one of five age groups: 10-17 years (27 siblings), 18-22 years (29 siblings), 23-29 years (32 siblings), 30-40 (23 siblings), and 41 years and over (25 siblings). The age groups served as the independent variable and each functional communication skill was treated as the dependent variable. The second and third hypotheses were answered using a series of paired t-tests. For the second hypothesis, the use was determined by obtaining an inter-item average for the total number of scale items that comprised each skill. The higher the inter-item average, the higher the use.

Results

The first hypothesis, which was not supported, predicted that perceived sibling use of functional communication skills would differ across the life-span. With the exception of referential skill, $F(4, 131) = 2.69$, $p < .05$, no significant differences in functional communication skills

emerged among the five age groups. Post-hoc (Scheffe) analysis revealed that perceived sibling use of referential skill is highest when the sibling is between the ages of 23-40, and is lowest when the sibling is either under the age of 22 years or over the age of 41 years.

The second hypothesis, which was supported, predicted that perceived sibling use of affectively-oriented functional communication skills would occur more frequently than perceived sibling use of nonaffectively-oriented skills. Ego support skill was rated as being more frequently used than comforting skill, $t(137) = 4.32$, $p < .001$; conflict management skill, $t(137) = 3.08$, $p < .01$; regulative skill, $t(137) = 4.82$, $p < .001$; persuasive skill, $t(137) = 5.29$, $p < .001$; and narrative skill, $t(137) = 5.29$, $p < .001$. Conflict management skill was rated as being more frequently used than regulative skill, $t(137) = 2.66$, $p < .01$; persuasive skill, $t(137) = 3.65$, $p < .001$; and narrative skill, $t(137) = 2.88$, $p < .01$. Comforting skill was rated as being more frequently used than persuasive skill, $t(137) = 2.26$, $p < .05$. Regulative skill was rated as being more frequently used than persuasive skill, $t(137) = 2.03$, $p < .05$.

The third hypothesis, which was partially supported, predicted that a significant difference would exist in the perceived use of functional communication skills between male and female siblings. Female siblings were perceived to use comforting skill, ego support skill, and conflict management skill at a higher rate than male siblings (see Table 1). No other significant differences were noted.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine sibling use of functional communication skills across the life-span. The first hypothesis predicted that perceived sibling use of functional communication skills would differ across the life-span. Generally, this hypothesis was not

supported. Goetting (1986) stated that sibling relationships change over the life-span in three stages: (a) childhood and adolescence, (b) early and middle adulthood, and (c) old age. Proximity is the cause of the change in frequency of interaction. However, a change in frequency of interaction may not affect perceived sibling use of communication skills. Once a sibling perceives that his/her sibling possess certain levels of functional communication skills, that perception may not change based simply on the siblings' frequency of interaction. This may be the primary reason why the first hypothesis was not supported.

A post-hoc analysis of the eight communication skills revealed that referential skill was the only skill that differed across the life-span. The use of referential skill, which is the perceived ability to convey information clearly, may be explained by the proxemics that exist among siblings and the amount of interaction that occurs among siblings at specific points in their relationship. We found that referential skill was perceived to be the lowest when the sibling was either under the age of 22 or over the age of 41 years. During childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, siblings tend to interact more because of life events and thus, there may be more information to convey. As siblings move into establishing their own families and careers (between the ages of 22 and 41), they may have less chance, opportunity and/or time for interaction with each other. Thus, when siblings do communicate, the information that is conveyed may be done more succinctly, clearly, and concisely.

The second hypothesis predicted that perceived sibling use of affectively-oriented functional communication skills would occur more frequently perceived sibling use of nonaffectively-oriented skills. This hypothesis was supported, and the findings parallel the results obtained by Burleson and Samter (1990) as well as Westmyer and Myers (1996). In their studies,

both research teams found that the more-highly intimate friendships placed a higher importance on affectively-oriented skills than nonaffectively-oriented skills. Because siblings provide each other with companionship and social support, the importance placed on affectively-oriented skills makes sense. Myers (1998) found that sibling communication satisfaction is predicted by perceived solidarity, trust, and self-disclosure, which are illustrated through the use of affectively-oriented functional communication skills. Perhaps sibling communication satisfaction is also facilitated by sibling use of functional communication skills.

The third hypothesis predicted that a significant difference would exist in the perceived use of functional communication skills between male and female siblings. This hypothesis was partially supported. A significant difference in the perceived use of all eight functional communication skills between male and female siblings was not reported. Rather, a significant difference emerged for three skills: comforting, ego support, and conflict management. This finding supports the results offered by Westmyer and Myers (1996), who concluded that women are more likely to perceive a greater use of affectively-oriented skills. Nonsignificant differences were reported between male and female siblings for the nonaffectively-oriented siblings, which can be explained through the findings of Floyd and Morman (1997). They concluded that affectionate communication was more socially appropriate for siblings than for friends. Thus, regardless of sibling sex, an emphasis on nonaffectively-oriented skills may not be necessary.

Two limitations of the study must be noted. First, this study focused on the perceptions of sibling use of functional communication skills as reported by one sibling. Examining how all siblings in a family perceive the use of functional communication skills may have yielded a more accurate picture of sibling communication. Second, respondents were told to identify a sibling

without any further directives. It is possible that the respondents reported on either their favorite sibling, their least favorite sibling, or the sibling with whom they have the most contact.

Future research should focus on how communication skills vary due to the sex composition of the sibling relationship. For instance, do female same-sex, male same-sex, and cross-sex sibling dyads differ in their perception and/or use of functional communication skills? And if so, how? Because previous research has indicated that slight differences in perceived communication behavior exist due to sibling sex (Floyd, 1996; Martin et al., 1997), it might prove fruitful to examine these differences across a host of communication behaviors.

In sum, the findings of this study indicate that although siblings use affectively-oriented functional communication skills at a higher rate than nonaffectively-oriented skills, the perceived use of functional communication skills does not differ across the life-span. Furthermore, female siblings are more likely to use affectively-oriented skills than male siblings. Because the sibling relationship is an involuntary relationship that is long-lasting, siblings may not have a preferential use of the skills when interacting with their siblings. And because siblings report a hgeneral higher usage of affectively-oriented skills, this finding adds credenec to the notion that the sibling relationship is inherently intimate.

References

Burleson, B. R., Kunkel, A. W., & Birch, J. D. (1994). Thoughts about talk in romantic relationships: Similarity makes for attraction (and happiness, too). Communication Quarterly, 42, 259-273.

Burleson, B. R., & Samter, W. (1990). Effects of cognitive complexity on the perceived importance of communication skills in friends. Communication Research, 17, 165-182.

Burleson, B. R., & Samter, W. (1996). Similarity in the communication skills of young adults: Foundations of attraction, friendship, and relationship satisfaction. Communication Reports, 9, 127-139.

Burleson, B. R., Samter, W., & Lucchetti, A. E. (1992). Similarity in communication values as a predictor of friendship choices: Studies of friends and best friends. Southern Communication Journal, 57, 260-276.

Cicirelli, V. G., & Nussbaum, J. F. (1989). Relationships with siblings in later life. In J. F. Nussbaum (Eds.), Life-span communication: Normative processes (pp. 283-299). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Fitzpatrick, M. A., & Badzinski, D. M. (1994). All in the family: Interpersonal communication in kin relationships. In M. L. Knapp & G. R. Miller (Eds.), Handbook of interpersonal communication (2nd ed.) (pp. 726-771). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Floyd, K. (1996). Communicating closeness among siblings: An application of the gendered closeness perspective. Communication Research Reports, 13, 27-34.

Floyd, K. (1997). Communication affection in dyadic relationships: An assessment of behavior and expectancies. Communication Quarterly, 45, 68-80.

Floyd, K., & Morman, M. T. (1997). Affectionate communication in nonromantic relationships: Influences of communicator, relational, and contextual factors. Western Journal of Communication, 61, 279-298.

Floyd, K., & Parks, M. R. (1995). Manifesting closeness in the interactions of peers: A look at siblings and friends. Communication Reports, 8, 69-77.

Goetting, A. (1986). The developmental tasks of siblingship over the lifecycle. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 48, 703-714.

Martin, M. M., Anderson, C. M., Burant, P. A., & Weber, K. (1997). Verbal aggression in sibling relationships. Communication Quarterly, 45, 304-317.

Martin, M. M., Anderson, C. M., & Mottet, T. P. (1997). The relationship between perceived understanding and self-disclosure in the sibling relationship. Communication Research Reports, 14, 331-338.

Myers, S. A. (1998, April). Sibling communication satisfaction as a function of interpersonal solidarity, individualized trust, and self-disclosure. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Central States Communication Association, Chicago, IL.

Myers, S. A., Smith, R. L., & Ropog, B. L. (1998). Communication openness and functional skills across organizational peer types. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Newman, J. (1991). College students' relationships with siblings. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 20, 629-644.

Samter, W., & Burleson, B. R. (1990). Evaluations of communication skills as predictors of peer acceptance in a group living situation. Communication Studies, 41, 311-325.

Westmyer, S. A., & Myers, S. A. (1996). Communication skills and social support across

friendship levels. Communication Research Reports, 13, 191-197.

Table 1

Sibling sex differences in functional communication skills

	Means			
Skill	Males	Females	t	p<
Comforting	18.73	21.30	-2.55	.05
Ego support	20.08	22.43	-2.44	.05
Conflict management	24.65	26.83	-1.94	.05
Regulative	19.90	20.00	- .14	NS
Persuasive	19.63	19.15	.58	NS
Narrative	20.55	19.03	1.60	NS
Referential	20.96	20.84	.13	NS
Conversational	15.67	16.30	-.90	NS